

*The Cambridge Companion to*  
**PASCAL**

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*Edited by*

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## CONTENTS

	<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
	<i>List of contributors</i>	xi
	<i>Chronology</i>	xiv
	<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xvi
	Introduction	I
	NICHOLAS HAMMOND	
1	Pascal's life and times	4
	BEN ROGERS	
2	Pascal's reading and the inheritance of Montaigne and Descartes	20
	HENRY PHILLIPS	
3	Pascal's work on probability	40
	A.W.F. EDWARDS	
4	Pascal and decision theory	53
	JON ELSTER	
5	Pascal's physics	75
	DANIEL C. FOUKE	
6	Pascal's philosophy of science	102
	DESMOND M. CLARKE	
7	Pascal's theory of knowledge	122
	JEAN KHALFA	

viii      Contents

8	Grace and religious belief in Pascal MICHAEL MORIARTY	144
9	Pascal and holy writ DAVID WETSEL	162
10	Pascal's <i>Lettres provinciales</i> : from flippancy to fundamentals RICHARD PARISH	182
11	Pascal and the social world HÉLÈNE BOUCHILLOUX	201
12	Pascal and philosophical method PIERRE FORCE	216
13	Pascal's <i>Pensées</i> and the art of persuasion NICHOLAS HAMMOND	235
14	The reception of Pascal's <i>Pensées</i> in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ANTONY McKENNA	253
	<i>Bibliography</i>	264
	<i>Index</i>	273

## FIGURES

1	Pascal's arithmetical triangle from the <i>Traité</i> (CO 1, 282)	page 41
2	Pascal's arithmetical triangle	42
3	Decision procedure	57
4	Rational choice theory	58
5	Plate I of Pascal's <i>Traité de l'équilibre des</i> <i>liqueurs</i> (Paris: Desprez, 1663)	90
6	Plate II of Pascal's <i>Traité de l'équilibre des</i> <i>liqueurs</i> (Paris: Desprez, 1663)	96
7	'The experiment of the vacuum within a vacuum', from <i>Traité de l'équilibre des liqueurs</i> (Paris: Desprez, 1663)	98

# 1 Pascal's life and times

We know little about Pascal. We also know a great deal about Pascal. We know little in the sense that Pascal never wrote about himself or his life in any detail, while contemporaries who did write about him offered something close to hagiography.<sup>1</sup> We know a great deal about him in the sense that his writings on science and human nature, society and salvation, tell us much about his view of the world and the developments of his day. We know or can confidently infer, to take a few random examples, how he perceived birth and death, royalty and papacy, Epictetus and Descartes, hare coursing and theatre-going, the execution of Charles I and the Peace of the Pyrenees.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, to the extent that his perceptions were always fresh and insightful – and that taken together they offer an almost unfathomably original and subtle philosophical vision – it is easy to feel that we know him intimately.

## CHILDHOOD

France of the 1620s and 1630s, the France in which Pascal was raised, was one of Europe's major powers, the centre of a vibrant movement of Catholic renewal and of an increasingly educated and refined ruling class. But it was also a place of seething conflict and chronic political instability. The Wars of Religion, which very nearly led to the permanent break-up of France, had come to an end in 1594, when Henri IV took Paris, but civil war – identified by Pascal as 'the worst of evils' – remained a very real peril (L 94/S 128). Henri himself was assassinated in 1610 by a Catholic zealot who disapproved of his tolerant treatment of French Protestants ('Huguenots'), leaving the country in the hands of his 9-year-old son, Louis XIII. This brought

renewed instability. True, Louis XIII eventually secured an outstanding first minister, Cardinal Richelieu, who, during a tenure of almost two decades (1624–42), succeeded in imposing a measure of order and political continuity on France. He demolished the few remaining French Protestant strongholds, most notably La Rochelle; pursued an aggressive foreign policy that took France into the Thirty Years' War; introduced new taxes, extended old ones, and imposed, where necessary, brutal measures to extract them; and clamped down on aristocratic lawlessness. The state he left behind was stronger and more centralised than the one he had inherited. But his policies provoked widespread unrest among a hungry and over-taxed populace and a resentful, much abused aristocracy. France's Protestants – some 5 per cent of the population – while cowed, were far from reconciled to their situation. And the Catholic Church itself harboured deep, perhaps growing, divisions between a cosmopolitan, 'high church' wing, represented at the extreme by the Jesuits, founded by Loyola in 1534 and closely connected to Rome, and a more rigorous, puritanical wing that felt a special loyalty to the French Catholic Church. The Pascal family identified closely with the latter.<sup>3</sup>

Pascal's parents, Antoinette Begon and Etienne Pascal, had married in 1616, when she was around 20 and he 28. Three of their children survived infancy: a daughter, Gilberte (b. 1620), Pascal (b. 1623) and another daughter, Jacqueline (b. 1625). In 1626, however, Antoinette died – Pascal would have had only the haziest memories of her. In her absence a governess, Louise Delfault, helped bring up Pascal and the two girls, but it was their father who exercised by far the greatest influence on them.

Etienne was a prominent member of the class of lawyers and government officials, the *noblesse de robe*, who had traditionally manned the upper echelons of the French state – his father had been one of the highest ranking officials in the Auvergne under Henri III. Trained as a lawyer himself, Etienne served as a tax assessor, then a senior financial magistrate (Président à la Cour des Aides), in the small administrative centre of Clermont, now Clermont-Ferrand, Auvergne's capital and the meeting place for one of France's twelve provincial tax courts.

But Etienne was much more than a civil servant: an accomplished humanist with fluent Greek and Latin, he was also one of the leading mathematicians of his age. In 1631, five years after Antoinette's

death, he resigned from his legal duties, sold his position and moved with his family to Paris, in order to concentrate on his studies. There he became an important figure in the circle of natural philosophers gathered around the Minim friar Père Mersenne, a circle which included such leading mathematicians as Roberval, Desargues and Fermat and which maintained close links with Europe's scholarly elite, including Gassendi, Hobbes and Descartes (then resident in Holland). The Mersenne circle had already made their break with Aristotelian philosophy, which still dominated the universities, and must have viewed Rome's prosecution of Galileo, renewed in 1633, with horror.

Etienne attached great importance to schooling and, free of any official responsibilities, undertook to educate his children himself. Employing what was, even by today's standards, an exceptionally liberal or 'child-centred' approach, he favoured experimentation and discovery over rote learning. The children were encouraged to teach one another, were given household responsibilities and were involved in adult concerns and debates. Pascal showed his genius early on, producing, if his sister is to be believed, a little treatise on sound at the age of 11 and discovering Pythagoras' Theorem by himself at 12. This made him the talk of Paris. Etienne had not originally intended to introduce Pascal to mathematics, the queen of sciences, until 15 or 16, but, seeing his aptitude and enthusiasm, he began to coach him. It was not long before Pascal was contributing on equal terms to the discussions within the Mersenne circle (*La Vie de M. Pascal par Mme Périer*, OC 1, 63–6). It is interesting to note that in 1634 Pascal's father had been appointed by Richelieu to an inquiry into the claims of the astrologer Jean-Baptiste Morin, professor of Mathematics at the Collège Royal, to have discovered a way of establishing longitudes, so putting maritime navigation on to a scientific footing. The method did not prove sound (Morin refused to accept the earth's mobility), but Etienne's work on this problem seems to have stimulated Pascal, whose *Pensées* often use images of disorientation – of drifting, lost at sea – to evoke the predicament of man without God: 'Just as I do not know from where I come, so I do not know where I am going... Such is my state, full of weakness and uncertainty' (L 427/S 681).<sup>4</sup>

Whatever credit Pascal's father gained for his work on this inquiry was jeopardised a year later. Having sold his Clermont presidency



in 1634, Etienne had invested heavily in government bonds. When in 1638 the French state, its finances stretched to breaking point by its entry into the Thirty Years' War, defaulted on these, Etienne took a leading part in the protests. Threatened with the Bastille, he fled to the Auvergne, where he would have had to remain in disgrace had it not been for Jacqueline. Educated, like Pascal, into an appreciation of good writing, she had developed into a talented poet and actress – Blaise was not the only Pascal talked about in the *salons*. After appearing in 1639 in a private performance laid on for Richelieu, she introduced herself to the cardinal, charmed him and made representation on behalf of her father, who was forgiven. The episode reminds us that the Pascals were connected not just to Paris's leading scientific circles, but also to its social ones – Jacqueline, at least, was a not infrequent visitor to the royal court. But it also reminds us that even a good loyalist like Etienne could find himself on the wrong side of the state. Pascal's life would illustrate the point again and again.

#### ROUEN

Richelieu, in fact, did more than forgive Etienne. No sooner had he returned to Paris than the cardinal gave him the post of chief tax officer to Rouen, Normandy's capital city, then in the throes of violent unrest provoked by bad harvests, high taxes and an outbreak of the plague. It was a position of great responsibility and Etienne appears to have executed his duties diligently, refusing to enrich himself at the tax-payer's expense. The three Pascal children, who were extremely close to their father, accompanied him to Rouen, where Pascal spent the early years of his adult life. This was the third place in which the young Blaise lived, and it is tempting to suggest that each added a layer to his imagination. If the *Pensées'* frequent evocations of vertiginous drops and dangerous abysses can be traced to the steep hills and volcanic peaks of Pascal's native Auvergne, and that work's many images of urban life to Paris, then perhaps Rouen, an important trading centre on the Seine, represents another source for his recurrent resort to watery and maritime metaphors. Perhaps it was a source, too, for some of Pascal's more graphic evocations of violence; though the worst of the unrest was put down before Blaise's arrival, its embers occasionally burst into flame.

Notwithstanding the presence of Pierre Corneille, whom the Pascals befriended, intellectual life was necessarily more constricted in Rouen than it was in Paris. It was here, however, that Pascal began to establish an international reputation as a mathematician and experimenter. In 1639 Mersenne had written to Descartes telling him about work that Etienne's young son was doing on conic sections. In 1640 he published a short treatise on projective geometry, *Essai pour les coniques*. In 1642 he produced a plan for a calculating machine capable of adding, subtracting, dividing and multiplying sums up to six figures long. Pascal was heavily involved in his father's tax work; the *machine d'arithmétique* was invented, he explained, to help with the tedious calculations it involved, though he also hoped that it could be of help to the public more generally (*Lettre Dédicatoire*, OC I, 331). Over the next few years Pascal worked with an anonymous local craftsman to produce over fifty models of different construction and made from different materials, before arriving at the efficient and hard-wearing model he patented (OC I, 340). The device was costly and Pascal's efforts to market it met with little success, but at least six survive, most of which are in good working order. They provide lasting physical testimony to Pascal's skill as a mathematician and an engineer.

Soon after putting the finishing touches to his adding machine, Pascal heard of the controversy caused by experiments conducted by the Florentine, Torricelli, a disciple of Galileo. When a tube filled with mercury was turned upside down in a basin of the same substance, an apparently empty space appeared at the end of the tube. What was in it? More modern-minded scientists, including Torricelli, contended that space was indeed empty, but orthodox scholastic thinkers taught, as a mainstay of scholastic science, to believe that 'nature abhors a vacuum', disagreed. With the aid of his father and a family friend, Pierre Petit, Richelieu's chief military and naval engineer, Pascal decided to repeat these experiments for himself. This marked the beginning of a series of extraordinarily elaborate and rigorous investigations stretching over four years, by which Pascal attempted to discredit, for once and for all, the scholastic doctrine, while also establishing the fact of atmospheric pressure. Pascal, who advocated the still novel view that scientific disputes should be resolved by appeal to the senses and reason rather than to ancient authority, made a point of involving neutral observers in his

experiments, and reporting his findings in as clear and objective a manner as possible.<sup>5</sup> This helped make his arguments all the more conclusive.

The controversy provoked by these experiments brought Pascal for the first time into open conflict with the Jesuits in the person of Père Noel, rector of the Jesuit Collège de Clermont in Paris and a dedicated upholder of scientific tradition. The two men exchanged a series of letters, Pascal treating the holy father's argument for 'a refined air' that entered the test tube through 'tiny pores' in the glass with an exaggerated respect bordering on mockery, and the Jesuit in turn, twisting and turning in an attempt to find answers to Pascal's objections. By this stage, however, Pascal had other reasons for quarrelling with the Society of Jesus.

When, early in 1646, Etienne Pascal had fallen and broken a leg, two local gentlemen who were expert bone-setters, the Deschamps brothers, moved in to take care of him. These two men turned out to be disciples of Jean Duvergier de Hauranne, the abbé de Saint-Cyran, who, until his death in 1643, had been spiritual director to the nuns of Port-Royal.

There is no need here to go into the history of Port-Royal in detail. It is enough to highlight two turning points. First, in the early years of the seventeenth century, under its formidable abbess, La Mère Angélique, the ancient Cistercian convent had moved from its old premises outside Paris – Port-Royal des Champs – to a large site within the city, gaining a reputation for rigour and extreme devotion in the process. (From 1648 they occupied both sites.) Second, in the course of the 1630s and early 1640s, under Saint-Cyran's direction, Port-Royal had ceased to be merely a convent and had become a centre of the French Augustinian movement, attracting influential friends and supporters. The Princesse de Guéméné and the Marquise de Sablé, for instance, both leading society figures, took lodgings there. At the same time, a number of young, high-born male *solitaires* gathered first around Port-Royal de Paris and then in some buildings adjacent to the old Port-Royal des Champs, where they passed their time in penance, in worship and (much more unconventionally) in manual labour. The Augustinians of Port-Royal defined themselves as much against the optimistic views of the Jesuits as they did against the opposite extreme of the Protestants, and in accordance with what they took to be the teachings of

St Augustine, emphasised man's corruption and feebleness and his need to find salvation in a self-abnegating love of God. When Pascal wrote

Without Christ man can only be vicious and wretched. With Christ man is free from vice and wretchedness.

In him is all our virtue and all our happiness.

Apart from him there is only vice, wretchedness, error, darkness, death, despair (L 416/S 1)

he was giving expression to characteristically Augustinian sentiments.

At first, under the leadership of Saint-Cyran, Port-Royal was known for the particularly rigorous forms of penitence and devotion it encouraged and for the good works it promoted, including, famously, the establishment of pioneering children's classes, the *petites écoles de Port-Royal*.<sup>6</sup> But, from the mid-1640s the convent became embroiled in the quarrel caused by its refusal to condemn a book, the *Augustinus*, by the Flemish theologian Jansenius, who argued that Augustine himself had taught that all human virtue was false virtue and that an individual's salvation lay entirely in the hands of God.

It would be quite wrong to suggest that the Pascal family were, even prior to the encounter with the Deschamps brothers, in any way religiously sceptical. Etienne was probably a good modern-minded Catholic, who, somewhat in the tradition of Montaigne, combined a devotion to the Bible and the ancient fathers with a strong allergy to speculative theology, especially the scholastic variant. Gilberte reported that he subscribed to the principle that 'anything that was a matter of faith, could not be a matter for reason' (OC 1, 68). His children would have been instructed in the Bible, the ancient fathers and the history of the church.

The Deschamps brothers, nevertheless, had a profound effect on the Pascal family. Giving Blaise works of spiritual guidance by Saint-Cyran, Jansenius and Antoine Arnauld – Saint-Cyran's successor as leader of the Augustinian movement, a gifted theologian with close family ties to Port-Royal – they converted first him and then, through him, the rest of the family to a more demanding form of Christian devotion. Jacqueline, perhaps the most bowled over

of all, decided that she wanted to join the nuns of Port-Royal, but was restrained from doing so by Etienne, who though himself 'converted' by the Rouen encounter, did not want to lose a daughter.

#### RETURN TO PARIS

In the summer of 1647 Pascal moved back to Paris, accompanied by Jacqueline. Suffering from an illness that has never been identified, he had for some months been paralysed from the waist down, was irritable and impatient and could only take nourishment in the form of warm liquid, swallowed drop by drop. Against his doctor's advice, he continued his scientific work and was visited by Descartes – the two men, who disagreed about the vacuum, among other things, did not become friends. He also began to visit Port-Royal, taking the monastery's side in the bitter debate then developing about Jansen's doctrines as defended by Antoine Arnauld, and a powerful theologian in his own right. But ties between Pascal and Port-Royal were not yet close, Pascal writing to Gilberte that his spiritual advisor there, M. de Rebours, was wary of his (Pascal's) confidence in his mental powers and that Pascal, in turn, did not feel able to submit to his spiritual guidance (*OC* II, 4–7).

In the early 1640s, when the Pascals were in Rouen, Richelieu and Louis XIII died, exposing France yet again to the dangers of a royal minority – the king's heir, Louis XIV, was only 4 years of age. At first the political scene, artfully managed by Richelieu's Italian successor, Cardinal Mazarin, remained relatively calm. In 1648, however, at the end of eighteen years of expensive warfare, matters came to a head. The government's desperate attempt to squeeze yet more money out of the owners of France's royal officers, and the hasty U-turn that followed on the first signs of resistance, unleashed a series of violent countrywide uprisings known as the Fronde. Pascal came from the officer class that led the first stage of the revolt, the *Fronde parlementaire*, and must have felt a certain sympathy with the parliamentarians' complaints that the government had mishandled the country's finances and abused its tax-raising powers. But he was convinced that insubordination would only make matters worse – that ultimately it was the poor who would suffer – and hence opposed active opposition (*L* 60/S 94; *L* 85/S 119).

The Pascals, fleeing Paris, went to stay with the oldest Pascal daughter, Gilberte, and her husband, Florin Pèrier, in Clermont. Not perhaps quite as accomplished as Pascal or Jacqueline, Gilberte and her family were nevertheless important figures in Pascal's life. Florin had conducted a famous experiment for him on Auvergne's highest summit, the puy-de-Dôme; Pascal sent carefully written letters of spiritual guidance to Gilberte; she in turn looked after him in illness and would, after his death, produce an artfully constructed, beautifully vivid, not always reliable biography – one which offered his life as an exemplary progression from worldly engagement, through conversions, to devotion and good works.<sup>7</sup>

The Pascals returned to Paris a year or so later. In September 1651, the same month as Louis XIV came of age, Pascal's father died, eliciting a letter of great grace and beauty to Gilberte that reflected, in characteristically abstract terms, on death. The pagan philosophers had nothing helpful to say about death because they saw it as natural to man, when in fact it was a product of sin. When undergone by a true Christian, death marks the point at which the soul rids itself of the last traces of sin and enters into union with Christ (OC 11, 19). 'We must search for consolation for our afflictions [*maux*] not in ourselves, not in other people, not in creation, but in God' (OC 11, 15). Within a few months Jacqueline had fulfilled her ambition and entered Port-Royal as a nun, leaving Pascal to live by himself.

Pascal was now 28, one of the most distinguished natural philosophers of his day, and financially independent, albeit in a modest way, for the first time in his life. He took advantage of his new situation, spending more time than ever before in the company of what passed, by the austere standards of Port-Royal, for corrupt, worldly circles.

In the summer of June 1652 he sent Queen Christina of Sweden, known for her enlightened patronage of writers and philosophers, one of his adding machines, along with a dedicatory letter (*Lettre à la sérénissime reine de Suède*) in which he heaped praise on the queen for combining the great and admirable attribute of temporal authority with the still greater and more admirable one of intellectual accomplishment. The religious perspective that dominated his letter to Gilberte on his father's death and that would later, in the *Pensées*, frame his treatment of the relation between political power and intellectual achievement is here not even hinted at (L 58/S 91 and 92).

## WORLDLY PERIOD

In the course of the next few years Pascal became very close to his childhood friend, the duc de Roannez, one the highest-born noblemen in France, who was destined for a great future as a statesman – the two men shared a deep interest in maths and physics. Roannez, in turn, introduced Pascal to two older gentlemen, the chevalier de Méré and Damien Mitton. (Mitton appears as a worldly interlocutor in several of the *Pensées*' fragments.) These aristocratic, sensuous, free-thinking and well-read connoisseurs had worked the gentlemanly code of *honnêteté* or good breeding into something like a full-blown, philosophical ethic – one that attached an extreme value to a rounded versatile sociability, defined in opposition to all forms of selfishness, small-mindedness and pedantry. Pascal would later repudiate this as being based, at bottom, on nothing but pride and vanity: 'The self is hateful. You cover it up, Mitton, but that does not mean that you take it away. So you are still hateful' (L 597/S 494). But his connection with men like Méré and Mitton gave him a formidable value system to argue against, and, paradoxically, greatly enriched his understanding of a good Christian life. Pascal admired the *honnête* ideal of a finely tuned sensitivity to other people's needs, believing that it offered a standard that Christians, and Christians alone, could hope to meet (L 647/S 532, L 778/S 643). Prompted by Méré, a keen gambler, Pascal, still scientifically active, began to work on a method for determining an equitable distribution of stakes between participants in a game terminated before its conclusion. The result, formulated in letters to the Toulouse mathematician Fermat and in some unpublished papers, laid the ground for modern probability theory.

For a long time biographers saw this period after his father's death as marking a new 'worldly phase' in Pascal's life, but this is now generally conceded to have been much overdone. Pascal certainly seems to have gone somewhat adrift during these years. He quarrelled with Jacqueline, who wanted to donate all of her wealth to Port-Royal, and doubtless missed her presence in his life. He threw himself into a social round at once beguiling and disappointing – as all *divertissements*, Pascal believed, were destined to be (L 135/S 168, L 620/S 513, etc.). And he found himself dwelling, perhaps a little too much, on his scientific reputation – on what Jacqueline, who came, at this

time, to fear for his soul, called 'l'estime et la mémoire des hommes' (OC I, 24). Yet Pascal was never tempted by religious scepticism or sensual indulgence. There was never a Pascal *libertin*.<sup>8</sup>

#### CONVERSION

We know, moreover, from the letters Jacqueline wrote to Gilberte, that even at the height of his social engagement, and while pursuing his mathematical and scientific inquiries, Pascal felt hollow and unfulfilled, and that he began, in the course of 1654, to seek frequent spiritual counsel with Jacqueline at Port-Royal.<sup>9</sup> Then, quite suddenly, on the night of 23 November between about 10.30 and 12.30, Pascal underwent an extraordinary spiritual conversion, in which, his pride finally humbled, he felt the presence of God – an experience he immediately recorded on a piece of parchment that he then carried with him, sewn into his jacket, for the rest of his life. The 'Memorial', with its simple juxtapositions of words, phrases and biblical quotations, and its explicit repudiation of the 'God of the philosophers' in favour of the 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob', gave powerful expression to the fervent, Bible-centred spirituality of Port-Royal.

It would be quite wrong to suggest that Pascal had now reached an end to his spiritual journey. The Augustinians recognised no such end for any but saints and angels; ordinary men would always be prey to temptations, distractions and doubts. But this second conversion was decisive in the sense that Pascal now became much more single-minded in his devotion, put himself under the spiritual direction of Antoine Singlin, the head of Port-Royal, and remained closely allied to the convent and its cause for the rest of his life.

In January 1655 Pascal went to Port-Royal des Champs to join the *solitaires*. It was probably during this stay that he had the conversation with the nuns' confessor, Isaac de Saci (recorded in the *Conversation avec M. de Saci*), in which, in an early version of the *pour au contre* method he would adopt in the *Pensées*, he used the sceptical Montaigne to disqualify the Stoic, Epictetus, and Epictetus to disqualify Montaigne, so as to clear the way for a Christian resolution of problems that both philosophers had highlighted. It was a dazzling performance – a little too dazzling perhaps for the devout de Sacy. It was also during this time or soon afterwards that Pascal is



believed to have produced some of his best-known spiritual writing, including *Ecrit sur la conversion de pécheur*, *Le Mystère de Jésus* and the 'Infini-rien' passage – the famous wager – later to be included in the *Pensées*.

An important backdrop to Pascal's conversion and subsequent association with Port-Royal is provided by the gradual intensification of the battle over Jansenius' *Augustinus*. Although the Augustinians of Port-Royal had the support of many French priests, including some prominent reforming bishops, France's leaders – Richelieu, Mazarin and Louis XIV – disapproved of the tone of Port-Royal's Christianity. They feared its desperate emphasis on human corruption and its steadfast renunciation of all worldly values would undermine the social order, weaken faith and play into the hands of the Protestants. In 1653 a papal bull, *Cum occasione*, had condemned five propositions relating to grace, which it was claimed Jansenius had advanced. In the same year Mazarin began the long processes to ensure that the French church formally accepted the bull. Meanwhile, early in 1655 the duc de Liancourt, an old friend of Port-Royal, was refused the sacrament at the church of Saint-Sulpice, in Paris, for his Jansenist sympathies. Antoine Arnauld responded with two open 'letters' – in fact thick tomes – in which he attacked his opponents, denied that the five propositions were to be found in Jansenius and reiterated unequivocally determinist, Augustinian views on grace. His enemies succeeded in having him arraigned before Paris's Faculty of Theology (the 'Sorbonne') and censured.

#### THE LETTRES PROVINCIALES

By this time the Augustinians had turned to Pascal for help. He responded with a series of best-selling pseudonymous 'letters', the *Provinciales*, produced with the help of Arnauld and his colleague, Nicole, in the utmost secrecy. (Had their role been identified, they would have faced imprisonment or worse.) Adopting the persona of a concerned but bemused outsider, who sets out to explain to a friend in the provinces (hence the 'Provincial Letters') what is really going on in the Sorbonne, Pascal's first letters had attempted to demonstrate that opposition to Arnauld was of an entirely opportunistic kind; the Thomists' and Jesuits' agreement on empty terms hid a deep disagreement on matters of substance. When Arnauld was expelled

from the Sorbonne, Pascal necessarily changed tack. The next seven letters mock the Jesuit's practical ethical doctrines – their teaching on sin and penance. Pascal's chief point here was to demonstrate, by citing published Jesuit texts, that in their eagerness to win allies and converts, the company, rather than adhering to more exacting supernatural standards of properly Christian ethics, permitted things – lying, murder, adultery – which were forbidden by natural law. Letters 11 to 17 represent a second change in tactics, as their author addresses himself directly to the Jesuits, defending his earlier accusations against them and answering their attacks on him. Irony has been replaced by anger and indignation. Indeed, by this stage Pascal had dropped his persona, if not his anonymity.<sup>10</sup> The letters address real people and the voice is Pascal's own.

It is easy for us, drenched in newspapers and television reporting and living in a society where public opinion and consumer preference are recognised as the last authority in almost everything, to underestimate the *Provinciales*' novelty and force. Pascal took an intensely important but obscure conflict, hitherto the preserve of trained theologians and casuists, and, by artfully combining the letter form with reportage and dialogue, made it the subject of a gripping drama. The achievement is all the more stunning when it is recalled that the *Provinciales* represent a new departure for Pascal: previously he had written only on scientific and spiritual topics.

We do not know why, after two final letters pillorying Louis XIV's Jesuit confessor, Father Annat, the *Provinciales* stop abruptly – perhaps it was simply too dangerous to go on with them, perhaps Pascal worried that they were merely calling further persecution on Port-Royal. This, however, was not the end of Pascal's involvement in religious polemic. The battle was over, but the war continued. Pascal had a hand in Antoine le Maître's *Lettre d'un avocat au parlement* (1657), which attempted to dissuade the Paris *Parlement*, semi-successfully, from registering *Cum occasione*, and wrote several 'letters' (*Ecrits des curés de Paris*) supporting a successful campaign to have a new Jesuit text, *Apologie pour les casuistes*, condemned by the Parisian authorities.

But these, the final years of Pascal's activities, saw him pursuing a host of other projects too. Soon after his own second conversion, Pascal had succeeded in converting his good friend, the duc de Roannez, so deterring him from a profitable marriage. Now, while in

the midst of the *Provinciales* campaign, Pascal embarked on a long and moving correspondence with the duc's younger sister, Charlotte de Roannez, who was wrestling with the decision of whether to join the nuns of Port-Royal. The letters, or the portions of them that survive, though impersonal, are intimate in tone. They show a Pascal whom we do not quite see anywhere else: a man happy to offer advice on Christian duty, penance and devotion; one who feels confident that he is on the right path, even if he cannot be sure of getting to his destination. In 1658 Pascal, encouraged by the duc de Roannez, who saw a chance of winning Port-Royal further intellectual credibility, launched an international competition, inviting solutions to the problem of the 'roulette' or cycloid – the problem of tracing the path of a point on the circumference of a wheel moving along a straight line. Pascal, who had first become interested in the matter while trying to distract himself from a crippling bout of toothache, had already identified a solution; declaring that none of the entries submitted to him was adequate or correct, he produced a series of papers and letters that helped lay the basis of infinitesimal calculus.<sup>11</sup>

#### THE *PENSÉES*

One project, above all, however, dominated these years – or at least our perspective on them. In March 1656, between the fifth and sixth *Provinciale*, Pascal's niece Marguerite Périer was cured of a long-standing eye abscess after touching a relic of the Holy Thorn – supposedly part of the Crown of Thorns that Christ had worn on the cross – kept at Port-Royal. Pascal, like other Port-Royalists, interpreted this as a sign of divine favour, and began work on a treatise on the theory and history of Judeo-Christian miracles. This project slowly evolved into a broader, more ambitious work, aimed at converting the open-minded, worldly sceptic – a Méré or a Mitton – to Christianity. In the summer or perhaps the autumn of 1658, more than two years after the Miracle of the Holy Thorn, Pascal gave a talk at Port-Royal, laying out his basic approach.

We will never know whether, had Pascal had the time, he would have completed this 'apology' for the Christian religion or what form it would have taken if he did.<sup>12</sup> Pascal, after all, left many unfinished works behind him (most notably the *Ecrits sur la grâce*, a rough series of 'letters' aimed at clarifying and defending Augustinian teachings

on grace, written at the time of the *Provinciales*). As it was, he had got no further than producing a large body of notes towards the project, some of which he then ordered under provisional headings and which today constitute the first half of the *Pensées*, before falling seriously ill. Looking back, we can see that Pascal produced his greatest work – *Provinciales*, *Ecrits des curés de Paris*, his writings on grace, letters to the Roannez, the work on miracles and fragments of the apology – in the space of about five years in his mid-thirties (1655–8). It had been a remarkably productive flowering, but by the spring of 1659 he was not even able to respond to letters, let alone undertake any creative work.

This, however, was not quite the end of Pascal's life. Over a year later he was well enough to travel to Clermont to see the Périers and take the waters, returning to Paris late in 1660. To this time belongs the *Prière pour demander à Dieu le bon usage des maladies* (Prayer asking God to allow us to make good use of illness), a work that obviously grew from Pascal's own experience of illness, and the *Trois discours sur la Condition des Grands* (Three essays on nobility), an extraordinarily dense and stimulating reflection on the prerogatives and duties of a ruling class that, Pascal held, had no intrinsic claim to its privileged position. He also supported various charitable initiatives, helped out indigent families on a personal basis, and, towards the very end of his life, in a characteristic display of practical-mindedness, worked in partnership with the duc de Roannez to establish Paris's first system of public coaches, the *carrosses à cinq sols*. Profits from the service went to the poor.

Despite these achievements, there was much to distress him. In February 1661 the Assemblée du Clergé de Paris, encouraged by Louis XIV, passed an act obliging all clergy and nuns to put their signatures to a formulary stating unconditionally that the five propositions were heretical *and* that they were to be found in Jansen's *Augustinus*. At the same time the '*petites écoles*' were forcibly disbanded and Port-Royal forbidden to recruit new nuns. Following instructions of Arnauld and his colleagues, the nuns of Port-Royal signed the formulary, but unwillingly. The episode almost certainly contributed to Jacqueline's death later that year. As a layman, Pascal was not himself obliged to sign the formulary, but he disapproved of Port-Royal's doing so. During the summer of 1662 his illness worsened. Confined to bed, he was looked after by Gilberte in her house in the parish of

Sainte-Etienne-du-Mont, where, in August, he died. His last words were 'Que Dieu ne m'abandonne jamais!', 'May God never abandon me!'

## NOTES

1. Pascal, in fact, thought that all autobiographical writing was inherently objectionable, describing Montaigne's attempt to capture himself in the *Essais* as 'stupid' (*sot*) (L 649/S 534; L 780/S 644).
2. For hare coursing see L 136/S 168 and for theatre-going see L 764/S 630 and L 628/S 521. For Charles I see L 62/S 96; for a possible oblique reference to the Peace of the Pyrenees of 1659 see L 60/S 94.
3. Briggs (1977) gives a good overview of the period.
4. See also *Trois Discours sur la condition des Grands*, which draws an analogy between the position of a man born into nobility and the victim of a shipwreck cast on to a foreign island (OC II, 194).
5. For the distinction between reason and authority see *Préface sur le traité du vide*, OC I.
6. These only lasted until 1660, but they taught Racine, among others, and through the publication of textbooks such as the *Grammaire* and the *Logique* had a lasting impact on French thought and education.
7. For a good discussion of Gilberte's biography see Philippe Sellier, 'Principes d'édition de *La Vie de M. Pascal*', in Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. P. Sellier (Paris: Garnier, 1991), pp. 136–45.
8. The best treatment of Pascal's so-called *période mondaine* is still to be found in Jean Mesnard, *Pascal*, revised 5th edn (Paris: Hatier, 1967), ch. 2, pp. 37–64.
9. See Jacqueline's letters to Gilberte dated 8.12.1654 and 25.1.1655, OC I, 21–6.
10. Pascal was not identified as the author of the letters, which had been put on the papal index in 1657, until after his death.
11. See the works collected under 'Oeuvres mathématiques d'Amos Dettonville' in OC II.
12. Pascal himself never used the word 'apology', which can have misleading implications if it encourages the view that he was aiming to 'prove' the truth in Christianity; Pascal believed that where religion was concerned, you had to believe it, to see it (L 7/S 41).